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All Hell into His Knapsack: The Spirit of Play in Two Fairy Tales

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Abstract

Examines psychological motifs and representations of the journey into maturity in two little-known Grimm fairy tales.

Additional Keywords

Brother Gaily (fairy tale); The Golden Bird (fairy tale); Psychological analysis of fairy tales

ALL HELL INTO HIS KNAPSACK

THE SPIRIT OF PLAY IN TWO FAIRY TALES

HOWARD CANAAN



Over the past 200 years, scholarship has revealed how rich the fairy tale is in spiritual, social, ethical and psychological meaning. Although this paper presents a psychological reading of two fairy tales, it also stresses what can be called intrinsic approach to the fairy tale that examines the play of its structures and patterns and analyzes what happens as we hear or read it, what the narrative does with our expectations, and how the fairy tale's comic resolution reflects on the story itself as an art form. I will focus on two stories from the Grimm Brothers' collection of fairy tales, "The Golden Bird" ("TGB") and "Brother Gailly" ("BG"). but the points raised here, I believe, can be extended to the analysis of many other fairy tales as well.

"TGB" is an example of the "youngest son as simpleton" type of fairy tale in which the apparently simple youngest son succeeds over his two older, supposedly "clever" brothers. In this story, a king sends his three sons on a quest to bring back the golden bird that has been stealing apples from his garden. After the two older sons fail, the king reluctantly sends his third son on the quest. With the magical help of a fox whom he befriends, the youngest son overcomes a succession of challenges and succeeds, not just in bringing back the golden bird, but in winning a king's daughter and a kingdom. "TGB" is a story that, like many fairy tales, symbolically presents the process of growth and maturation and the freedom and autonomy — winning a kingdom — that this process brings. The apples on the tree in the king's pleasure-garden that are counted as they ripen suggest the king's sons, whose ripeness will also be measured and counted.

Ripeness, or maturity, then, is central to this story.¹ The narrative sequence traces this process of growth. It does so, first, by the increasing size of the challenges that the King's son faces: he must win, first, a feather, then a bird, then a horse, and then a princess, which he does only after he (or rather the fox, helping him) moves a mountain. At this point, he attains a level of autonomy that enables him to demand his reward from the king "whether he wanted to or not" (Segal 211)² of the king's daughter. Growth in size accompanies growth towards independent selfhood. But the sequence of challenges also suggests that growth and maturity mean more than just size. The bird-horse-princess sequence suggests development towards the domesticated (horse) and human (princess). Also, the nature of the challenges defined by the fox's instructions becomes increasingly complex. The instructions not to put the bird in the golden cage and not to put the golden saddle on the horse are both tests of the ability to distinguish inner value

from external appearance, to recognize that "all that glitters is not gold." The next challenge, not to let the princess say goodbye to her parents before she leaves with him, requires a greater level of ethical sophistication — autonomy from the need for parental approval. The fox's final command, that the king's son shoot him and cut off his arms and legs — an act of apparent murder and extreme ingratitude — is even more conceptually and ethically difficult to perform. The increasing moral complexity of the fox's instructions is revealed by the fact that they require, on the surface, an increasingly severe violation of moral codes. As the narrative proceeds, the initial lesson of seeing beneath the surface of things grows in richness and depth. The theme of the story — cognitive and ethical growth toward maturity — is reflected in its narrative structure.

This approach to the story draws directly upon two insights that Bruno Bettelheim offers in his reading of Grimm's fairy tales in *The Uses of Enchantment*: one is that the characters and events in fairy tales are projections or externalizations of inner psychic processes; the other is that a central of concern of fairy tales is the process of growth and maturation towards adulthood. The correspondences that Bettelheim draws between symbolic elements in the fairy tale and the equally symbolic concepts of Freudian psychology, contribute significantly to an understanding of the dynamics of the fairy tale, which can be read as an allegory of internal psychological functions. As Max Luthi notes in *Once upon A Time* (42-3), figures in fairy tales don't have an inner psychological life. This is because they themselves can be viewed as projections or externalizations of that very life. In "TGB," for instance, the fox, "sitting on the edge of a wood" (203),³ inhabits the border between consciously socialized and unconscious processes. It is the youngest son's kindness to the fox — his respect for the unconscious, instinctual energies within himself — that enables him to utilize these energies and attain fully mature selfhood (kingship) in the end. The king's instructions to his sons "That they should keep watch under the tree every night" (201) to guard the apples in the garden, to keep awake in the realm of sleep, is an injunction to integrate conscious and unconscious processes, an injunction fulfilled by the hero only at the end of the story. The two elder sons' failure to watch at night, like their attempt to kill the fox, reflects their disconnect-edness with or hostility to their inner selves. As is typical of the fairy tale, the youngest son succeeds because of his natural kindness ("Don't worry, little fox, I won't hurt you, no," [204-5]) his potential for inner harmony based on his willingness to nurture aspects of his inner self. Each of his tasks is performed at night, when figures like the guards

and grooms (inhibitions or repressions) are asleep. Continuing this psychological allegory, the fox's transformation into human form, which happens only "long after" (216) the youngest son has become king — attained healthy egohood — reflects a higher state of consciousness developed at a later stage of adulthood, a level of humanity in which the fox (the unconscious) has disappeared. The hero's higher integration of conscious and unconscious processes, by making his instinctual energies fully accessible to consciousness, has made the fox — that which the self isn't conscious of — disappear and assume human form. "TGB" ends with a sense of humanistic integration similar to that evoked by Blake in the last four lines of "Auguries of Innocence":

God appears, and God is Light
To those poor souls who dwell in Night;
But does a Human Form display
To those who dwell in realms of Day (Sampson 178)

Such a reading, of course, like a human being hidden in the form of a fox, is invisible to the child who hears a fairy tale. Other aspects of "TGB," however, such as its use of incremental variations within patterns of narrative repetition, support the fairy tale's teachings of freedom and autonomy. The youngest son repeatedly disobeys the fox's instructions about what he should do when he finds the bird, the horse, and the princess, but each of these apparent failures marks a progression for the hero, a progression indicated by small but significant variations in the characteristic fairy-tale pattern of threefold repetition. The golden bird is guarded by sleeping soldiers; the golden horse is tended by sleeping grooms and the beautiful princess goes to the bathhouse alone to bathe. This reduction of the external restraints imposed by the repressive superego figures is a measure of the maturation of the developing self: the punitive guards are replaced by the more nurturing grooms and then the guardian figures disappear entirely. In a similar pattern of maturation, the punishment that the youngest son is threatened with becomes progressively less elaborate. When caught with the bird, he is "brought before a court, and as he confessed everything, sentenced to death" (206); when caught with the horse, he is thrown into prison, but there is no mention of any confession; when caught with the princess, he is put into prison and is again sentenced to death. This sentence, however, is imposed with a small but significant variation. With the bird and the horse, the previous kings⁴ offer the hero his life and a further reward as an alternative to the death that they threaten him with. These alternatives are prefaced with the word "but": "But the king said he would spare him his life on the condition...." (206) "But the king promised to grant him his life.... if...." (207) With the princess, the king prefates his conditions to the hero with the words "Your life is forfeit and you'll be pardoned only if...." (211). The little word "and," another small but significant variation in a pattern of threefold repetition, suggests a deeper truth: that reward and punishment are not simply alternatives; they are both part of the process of growth

that the story traces. In fact, as we shall see further on, the movement from the exclusionary, restrictive word "but" to the inclusive word "and" reflects, in miniature, the theme and narrative structure of the entire story.

Another way that the narrative technique of "TGB" reinforces the themes of growth and integration is indicated by the fox's instructions to the youngest son, after he has won the princess, to *go back* and capture the horse and the bird. The fox thus has him connect back with previous stages of his journey — and of himself — and take what he has gained at a higher stage in order to retrieve something at a previous one. The art of the story, the knitting together of later strands of the narrative with previous ones, reflects the theme of self-integration that the story presents.

But the special freedom or liberation that a fairy tale like "TGB" offers is provided by its central paradox: the fact that the hero's path to success is defined and created as much by disobeying the fox's instructions as it is by his obeying them. It is the youngest son's disobedience in the middle of the story regarding the bird, the horse and the princess that leads, in fact, to further growth: by putting the bird in the golden cage, he gets to try for the golden horse; by putting the golden saddle on the golden horse, he gets to try for the princess; by allowing the princess to say goodbye to her parents, he gets the chance to marry her himself. Each act of disobedience is accompanied with imprisonment and the threat of death, but the threat conceals the opportunity for growth. Had the king's son obeyed the fox's instructions, his reward — and his growth — would have been less. By repeatedly forgiving the youngest son — once he has demonstrated his inherent kindness and his ability to see beyond the simple pleasure principle — the fox reveals the flexibility and self-forgiving capacity of our instinctual nature.

The youngest son, like the hero of classical and Shakespearean comedy that Northrop Fry describes in *Anatomy of Criticism*, achieves fulfillment by breaking or eluding a parental law or restriction (164-5), equivalent in psychological terms to the restrictive superego that operates as the parental surrogate. As in the resolution that brings about the formation of new society represented by the marriage of young lovers in romantic comedy, the violation of the letter of the law fulfills its spirit in "TGB." The youngest son's disobedience in "TGB" arises from his good nature: his wish to give the golden bird and the golden horse the gold cage and gold saddle that he believes they deserve, his wish to give the princess the comfort of saying goodbye to her parents, his unwillingness to apparently murder the fox who has befriended him. The paradoxical "and" that the King speaks to the hero — "Your life is forfeit and you'll be pardoned only if you move the mountain..." — reveals the underlying truth beneath the challenges that have confronted the hero: punishment and pardon are both part of the matrix of growth.

The hero's success in the fairy tale, then, can be read psychologically as growth towards autonomy, or, in Freudian terms, towards freedom from the strictures of the

superego. But the fairy tale is more than psychological allegory; it is also an art form in itself, and the structure and dynamics of its narrative define the sly and playful freedom of this art. We have seen, for example, how the fox's directions in "TGB" and hero's disobedience of those directions expand the narrative. Just as the violation of restrictive paternal law in Shakespearean comedy creates the playful disorder, the shifting flow of roles and identity out of which the comic form develops, in "TGB" the hero's disobedience, rooted in his instinctive good nature, creates both his and the story's growth. In its narrative structure, its symbolic dimension, and its manipulation of its own conventions, it embodies the spirit of play and freedom that it celebrates.

To develop this idea further, I would like to turn to one more Grimm brothers' fairy tale, "Brother Gaily," which illuminates this point in a special way. "BG" is an example of what Bettelheim classifies as "Tales of Two Brothers characterized by two protagonists, usually brothers, one a stay-at-home and the other a wanderer and adventurer, representing 'seemingly incompatible aspects of the human personality (90).' After being initially together for a time, the brothers separate but keep together by means of some magical instrument (the knapsack in "BG"). The adventurous brother gets into trouble, is rescued by the stay-at-home brother, and the two brothers are reunited at the end of the story.

This is what happens in "BG." St. Peter is the stay-at-home brother (although his home, interestingly, is heaven) and Brother Gaily is the adventurer. As Brother Gaily says, "I'm used to wandering and need to be on the move (146)." The two separate over a disagreement concerning the distribution of gold they have been rewarded, St. Peter rescues Brother Gaily when he gets into difficulty trying to bring a dead maiden back to life, they separate again, and they are finally reunited when Brother Gaily outwits St. Peter and slips into heaven.

The dynamic of law versus freedom noted in "TGB" is much more fully developed in "BG," beginning with the central contrasting figures of St. Peter and Brother Gaily. St. Peter is the force of social, religious or ethical law, the force of constraint. He is the guardian of the straight and narrow path who tries to assure that Brother Gaily will "not walk in forbidden paths (142)." Brother Gaily is the natural man, the amoral, instinctual self that evades the overt morality of the law. Brother Gaily's name in German, "Bruder Lustig," derives from the word for "Lust, pleasure or desire," and Brother Gaily embodies the pleasure principle. He is, like the spirit of the passing moment, always on the move. The division between the two forces of conscious restraint (St. Peter) and instinctual energy (Brother Gaily) is healed in "TGB" when the fox brings the youngest son "to the light of day" (215) and when the youngest son in turn restores the fox's human form. In "BG" this dynamic is at work even more centrally.

Structurally and thematically, "TGB" is a story of *addition and accumulation*. It is a parable of growth whose pattern is set in motion at the beginning by the King's determination to add to what he has: "If the feather is so precious... just the one isn't enough for me; I must and will have the whole bird (202-3)." This quest for expansion and enlargement is completed when the feather leads to, not just a bird, but a whole kingdom. This expansion to fulfilled selfhood occurs when the hero's mustard seed of faith, through the agency of the fox, moves a mountain. In direct contrast to this, "BG" is, structurally and thematically, a story of *division and dispersal*. This pattern is set in motion, again, at the beginning, where we are told, "There was once upon a time a great war, and when it came to an end, many soldiers were discharged." It continues when Brother Gaily divides his bread into four parts and shares it with St. Peter, who receives the bread by dividing his identity into four parts. This process of division and dispersal is further compounded when St. Peter and Brother Gaily split from one another as a result of disagreements about how to divide things — the lamb, the gold and the two dead maidens in the story. Brother Gaily, who, we are told, "wandered around the world yet a long while," (147) traces a footloose course — again a pattern of dispersal — quite different from the straight path that the hero follows in "TGB."¹⁵ "TGB" explores how things are added onto and connected with one another; "BG" explores how things are distributed and divided. "TGB" portrays the process of synthesizing and building experiences; "BG" enacts the process of distributing and managing dual aspects of the self, as represented by St. Peter and Brother Gaily.

If "TGB" literalizes the Scriptural metaphor that "Faith can move mountains," "BG" literalizes another — Jesus's injunction to "not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing." The central division in "BG" is between Saint Peter (the right hand of rectitude and moral law) and Brother Gaily (the left hand of slipperiness, waywardness and freedom). St. Peter is a good doctor (suggesting healing and transcendence) and Brother Gaily is a good cook (suggesting eating and oral pleasure); St. Peter heals and restores the dead to life, supplying our spiritual needs and offering transcendence; Brother Gaily prepares food to supply our earthly needs. The two characters carefully divide their functions: St. Peter is awarded the lamb, but Brother Gaily must carry it. The entire relationship between the two is defined in terms of the division of things into halves: "Why don't you come along with me, then," St. Peter says to Brother Gaily, "and if I earn anything, you shall have half." (131) The king offers St. Peter "half my kingdom." (138) After St. Peter gives Brother Gaily's knapsack its magic power, the two figures separate and pursue different paths. Finally, "BG" leaves us with the ultimate division into two paths, one to hell and one to heaven. By foregrounding these dualisms, "BG" functions as a particularly self-reflective — and in this sense literary — narrative.

We can see this self-reflectedness also in the way that

"BG" inverts or displaces a number of motifs found in "TGB" in ways that help clarify the sense of freedom, or play in the fairy tale. In "TGB," the two elder sons squander and dissipate their wealth and come to no good; in "BG," Brother Gaily repeatedly dissipates his goods, yet he finds his way to heaven. The youngest son's success in being able to keep awake at night starts him on the road to success; Brother Gaily, on the other hand, uses the knapsack, his magic gift, to help him get to sleep in the haunted castle. The youngest son correctly chooses the shabby inn over the brightly-lit inn; Brother Gaily, in contrast, chooses the broad road to hell over the narrow, difficult path to heaven. "I'd be a fool," he thinks, "if I took the rough and narrow one." (147) Each of Brother Gaily's choices is an assertion of immediate fulfillment and a rejection of the discipline that the youngest son in "TGB" learns on the path to maturity.

"BG" establishes a zone of freedom that playfully questions the moral and metaphysical assumptions associated with a "spiritual" reading of the fairy tale. Unlike "TGB," which begins with an Edenic apple tree suggestive of childhood innocence, "BG" begins in a world marked by adult experience and mortality: "Once upon a time, there was a great war...." (129) "TGB" takes us from childhood to adulthood; "BG" takes us from adulthood — Brother Gaily's discharge from service in war — to death — Brother Gaily's entry to heaven. Although St. Peter is a key figure in the story, it is Brother Gaily and his world of naturalistic experience that provides the central focus. The dualisms of "BG" reflect the distance between the paths of St. Peter and of Brother Gaily, between the works of eternity and the works of time. The juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, of the spiritual and the material orders of being, gives the story its peculiar tone of comic irreverence, such as when Brother Gaily treats devils in the haunted castle as nothing more than obstacles to his getting a good night's sleep or — shades of Simon Magus — his use of St. Peter's power to resurrect the dead as a ticket to wealth. We see this mood of pragmatic irreverence again when the king asks his counselors whether he should let Brother Gaily try to bring his dead daughter back to life. Their response, that "he might as well take the chance; his daughter was dead anyway," (140) places the miracle of resurrection within a very down-to-earth context: "Give it a try; what have you got to lose?" Admittedly, in fairy tales the miraculous is characteristically treated as a natural part of normal experience. But "BG" is still up to something special. Brother Gaily's trickster role defines the peculiar tone of the story itself and undercuts certain assumptions underlying a traditional "spiritual" reading of the world or of the text.

First, "BG" undercuts a conventionally moral or religious reading by its irreverent ending, in which the properties of the magic knapsack, first, keep Brother Gaily out of hell and then enable him to trick St. Peter into letting him into heaven. The comic ending lies not just in Brother

Gaily's success in attaining heaven, but in his indifference to the moral distinction between heaven and hell; they are simply two places to stay and, aware as ever of the physical laws of the universe, he tells St. Peter, "I've got to stay somewhere." (148) Indeed, his preference is for hell, and the path of ease and pleasure that he has followed would seem to point him naturally in that direction.

As a character, Brother Gaily also undermines traditional concepts of verbal validity by manipulating the truth to satisfy his needs. Rather than admit he has eaten the lamb's heart, he tells St. Peter, "Honestly, brother, a lamb has no heart. You think about it and it'll come to you; it just doesn't." (133-4) But then, to get an extra portion of the gold that St. Peter distributes, he reverses himself, admits that he ate the lamb's heart, and adds, "Of course a lamb has a heart, just like every other animal." (139) Brother Gaily's indifference to verbal truth, to abstract validity that stands apart from one's bodily needs, suggests again the Freudian *id's* indifference to the reality principle. But Brother Gaily's success with this approach suggests as well the story's indifference to, or amusement at, any attempted statement of metaphysical truth that is designed to be abstracted from the text and texture of the words themselves. Perhaps a lamb has no heart, and perhaps a story has no heart, or extractable core of meaning.

Like the fox in "TGB," the knapsack in "BG" enables its hero to succeed and, like the hero of Shakespearean comedy, elude the threats of repressive legality. Though it is a gift of St. Peter, the knapsack and its magic allows Brother Gaily to transcend the distinctions of conventional morality, summed up at the end by the distinction between heaven and hell. In this way, the magic knapsack unlocks more than do the keys to heaven or hell. The words of the devil who refuses Brother Gaily entrance into hell support this observation. "[I]t's as much as your life is worth not to let him in," the devil says of Brother Gaily, "or he will wish all hell into his knapsack." (146) The knapsack's uses expand as the story develops — to provide food, to capture devils, to transport Brother Gaily to heaven. As its function develops — first to hold two cooked geese, then to hold nine devils and finally to hold Brother Gaily — it assumes control over the realm of subjective consciousness. The devil's words point to the knapsack's ultimate power — to open up a limitless space for imaginative worlds in the story, swallowing things, people, devils and, finally, hell itself. The knapsack, like consciousness, in the words of Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," fills immensity. (Sampson 251)

Like fiction itself, Brother Gaily's knapsack is an empty space with the potential to contain all things. Its magic, which enables Brother Gaily to "wish all hell" — the ultimate region of moral punishment — "into it," asserts the power of the fairy tale to transcend the boundaries of moral convention, verisimilitude, or extrinsic interpretation. It is a token of the art of the fairy tale itself. ~

Notes

1. In *Fairy Tales and After*, Roger Sale suggests a connection between the formal cohesiveness of a fairy tale or children's story and the version of growth and integration that it projects. He points out, for example, how the fragmentary nature of the narratives of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* reflect Dodgson's negative attitude about the process of maturing from childhood to adulthood.
2. This and subsequent reference to "The Golden Bird" and "Brother Gaily" will be taken from the Lore Segal-Maurice Sendak selection of Grimm's *Fairy Tales in The Juniper Tree*.
3. This is just one example of a long literary tradition — the *selva oscura* that begins Dante's *Commedia*, the wood of Error in Book One of Spenser's *The Faery Queen*, the woods in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the woods in Milton's *Comus* are obvious examples — in which journeys into woods or forests can suggest unconscious processes.
4. The fact that the various kings in the story are given no distinguishing names or attributes further supports the idea that they are all different stages or aspects of the same thing — the mature autonomy that the hero seeks.
5. The word "straight" has special significance in "TGB." We are repeatedly told that the fox "straightened his tail" when carrying the youngest son, and the fox repeatedly directs the youngest son to go "straight" to where the bird, the horse or the maiden are. And once he has won the maiden, the youngest son traces a path straight back to where he began.

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REVIEWS, continued from page 34

delighter in the intellectual riches of the creeds; Miss Sayers as explorer of what is still the greatest work of Christian Fantasy, *The Divine Comedy*; Miss Sayers as the self-convicted and repentant sinner; Miss Sayers as one for whom the dominical command to love one's God with all one's heart, strength, soul, and mind was both taken literally and enacted with passion; and finally, despite her own saying to the contrary, Miss Sayers as (dare I say it?) mystic and saint.

Pointings, identifications, suggestions, and hints, yes; definitive revelations, not yet. Maybe the truth is too obvious, too blatant, too blazingly intense to be called by name. Maybe the peculiar modern (and, I regret to say, post-modern) notion that sanctity cannot exist in the life of one so robustly physical, engaged, opinionated, and entertaining has rendered readers unable to see the real thing. And maybe such matters can only be exhibited, being, finally, incapable of analysis. Dr. Reynolds has provided in an appendix entitled "Euclid's Tennis Court," a quotation from Miss Sayers' unpublished autobiographically-based unfinished novel *Cat o' Mary*, in which Katherine Lammas (universally agreed to be Dorothy L. Sayers) discovers (by applying Euclidean geometry to the task of locating a grass-covered tennis court) "that magnificent moment when the intersecting circles marched out of the pages of the Euclid book and met on the green grass in the sun-flecked shadow of the mulberry tree." (p. 386) This quotation, as close to the final few verses of *The Divine Comedy* in meaning and intent as makes no never mind,² can stand as a metaphor for Miss Sayers' passionate, joyous, painful, devout, and astonishingly revelatory life.

— Nancy-Lou Patterson

1. With the present review I have reviewed, by my count, 22 books about Miss Sayers (for *Mythprint* and *Mythlore*) including 11 biographies, 2 books of essays, 3 bibliographies, and 6 books touching upon her work as a detective novelist, a playwright, and a theologian.
2. This reads in part:

As the geometer his mind applies
To square the circle, not for all his wit
Finds the right formula, howe'er he tries,
So stand I with that wonder — how to fit
The image to the sphere; so sought to see
How it maintained the point of rest in it.

